

25 May, 2017

Office of The Hon. Michael Ferguson MP  
Minister for Health  
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Dear Minister Ferguson,

Thank you for taking the time to meet with representative from Limbs 4 Life, the Tasmanian Amputee Society and the Australian Orthotic Prosthetic Association recently. We were grateful for your time to discuss the provision of services for amputees living in Tasmania.

### **Limbs 4 Life background**

*'We empower amputees' with knowledge and support to make a real difference, because no one should have to go through limb loss alone'.*

Limbs 4 life is the peak body for amputees in Australia and was founded as a non-profit charity in 2004. Limbs 4 Life works to provide early intervention support to amputees and their families, children born with limb deficiencies and their carers; access to specific health-based literacy to inform amputees, and advocates for fair and equitable outcomes for members of the Australian amputee population.

### **Provision of Prosthetic Services in Tasmania**

Amputees in all states and territories of Australia have access to choice over their prosthetic provider; with the exception of Tasmania. Even territories with smaller populations such as the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory offer both private and public services and as such, individuals living with limb loss can choose who their preferred provider will be. This mandate is also underpinned by the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) giving people with a disability in Australia choice and control.

Midway through the 1990's a state-based consultation was conducted in Tasmania with the then amputee population. Over 550 clients were sent surveys seeking their feedback on a variety of topics. One of those topics included the provision of and access to a private prosthetic service. Overwhelmingly the feedback from amputee community indicated that a private prosthetic service would enable prosthetic users to have choice about the provision service, rather than one single service provider overseeing the Tasmanian prosthetic industry. Nearly thirty years on, there has been no progress and Tasmanian amputees are still limited to one service in their state.

## **Comparison**

The Victorian Artificial Limb Funding Program (VALP) provides clear pathways to how productivity and service can be shared among providers. In Victoria, there are twelve separate facilities which administer VALP for the state. Examples can be drawn from the Royal Melbourne Hospital (Prosthetic and Orthotic department) who currently have prosthetic staff and share funding and service provision with the privately operated Orthopaedic Appliances Pty Ltd. (Oapl). Oapl manufacture, supply and fit prosthetic limbs to publicly funded amputees. Funding for these services are paid for by the Royal Melbourne Hospital's VALP funding. Similarly, the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne, also engages the services of Oapl to manufacture, supply and fit prosthetic limbs to children funded under by scheme. Like the Royal Melbourne Hospital, the Royal Children's Hospital also provides prosthetic services. In these cases, amputees and parents of children born with limb deficiencies are provided with the choice of service provider. The benefit of the sharing of these services can mean faster treatment times for the consumer and the opportunity to select their own provider.

## **Wait times**

Limbs 4 Life are aware that amputees in Tasmania have travelled to the mainland (at their own expense) to receive prosthetic limb/s due to the lack of choice of providers in their own state. Limbs 4 Life, we have fielded calls relating to the extended delays for items like prosthetic stump socks and liners (mandatory for daily prosthetic use) which if not replaced quickly can have a negative impact on the physical capacity and overall health-based outcomes for consumers. It is worth noting that lower limb amputees need to change, wash and clean stump socks and liners on a daily basis for hygiene and skincare purposes. Delays of up to five weeks for the provision of liners (which has been reported in Tasmania) can result in larger costs to the healthcare budget especially if the individual is prone to infection, has type 2 diabetes and/or vascular problems and needs to be re-admitted to hospital for treatment due to stump breakdowns and skin infections. In nearly all cases, the supply and delivery of stumps socks and liners from manufactures is 48 hours. It can also be noted that manufactures very rarely run out of stock and if products need to be purchased internationally, that the average delivery time is no more than up to three days. It is difficult to comprehend a delay in the supply and provision of liners and stump socks for any members of the Australian amputee community, unless there are funding constraints on these items.

## **Limbs 4 Life Peer Support Program**

The Limbs 4 Life Peer Support Program is grounded by best practice governance, policies and procedures. These have been developed over many years and revised regularly to ensure that the volunteers, program recipients, staff and organisation are protected and supported. The confidentiality and privacy of volunteers and program recipients are safe-guarded at all times.

Peer Support Volunteers must submit a formal application, undergo a national police check and have referees checked by Limbs 4 Life staff. In addition, all Peer Support Volunteers:

- Undertake a formal training program delivered by Limbs 4 Life
- Understand and sign a variety of policies (eg. Code of Conduct, Gift Policy, Confidentiality Policy, Position Description)
- Are insured under the Limbs 4 Life 'Volunteer Insurance'
- Complete a report for Limbs 4 Life after each visit
- Participate in re-fresher training as requested or required
- Can access post-visit debriefing from Limbs 4 Life staff or with staff from Monash University's Psychology and Sociology Department (with whom we have a debriefing arrangement).

People seeking peer support are referred to the program via healthcare providers, themselves, family member or friends. In all instances, the individual (amputee) must consent to a visit. Peer Support Volunteers are matched to a person requesting support on the basis of age, gender, site of amputation, reason/cause for amputation.

Regardless of the cause of amputation, many individuals who experience limb loss experience detrimental psychosocial outcomes which negatively impact on their ability to regain independence and lead fulfilling lives. Consequently, some amputees develop other psychological disorders or psychiatric illnesses after their amputation. The impact of disability is not only restricted to the individual with limb loss but can also negatively impact on their caregivers (family, friends and colleagues).

Limbs 4 Life's Peer Support Program is grounded in extensive national and international research, making it a best practice service. The Peer Support Program actively supports amputees to:

- Manage fears associated with amputation
- Cope with feelings of vulnerability and depression
- Understand feelings of anxiety relating to body image, self-esteem and sexuality
- Adapt to the adjustment of amputation/s
- Manage the short-term and long-term expectations of living with amputation/s
- Re-engage in recreation, community, activities and employment.

Our Peer Support Volunteers also benefit from being part of the program in ways such as:

- Developing and extending their skills and knowledge
- Increased self-confidence
- Learning about local communities and systems
- Providing an entrée into further education or employment
- Feeling 'good' about donating their time to assist others in a similar situation

### **Benefits of Peer Support**

The Peer Support Program is well regarded and recognised by medical and allied health care professionals who make referrals to the program on behalf of their patients. Professionals engage with the program because it is considered to be a formally managed, quality assured and safe one that involves trained experienced amputees who can "walk the talk". Limbs 4 Life's Peer Support Program is so well regarded by government and healthcare providers it forms part of the 'Amputee Treatment Plan' developed by the South Australian Health Department and is utilised by healthcare providers in each state and territory of Australia; sadly, with the exception of Tasmania.

Our Peer Support Program improves the wellbeing, independence and health awareness of disabled amputees and their families. As such, it plays a role in reducing hospital re-admissions, minimises the need for additional psychosocial services and supports the good work of busy healthcare professionals.

### **Peer Support for Tasmanian Amputees**

It is disappointing to note that while healthcare providers in all states and territories make use of the Limbs 4 Life Peer Support Program, that it is under-utilised in Tasmania. Limbs 4 Life have received positive feedback from Tasmanian members of the *Vascular Nurses Association* and *Rehabilitation Nurses Association* all of whom would welcome access to the Program to further support their patients. The Tasmanian Amputee Society and Limbs 4 Life have been advised that there needs to be a policy in place for amputees (and their family members) to gain access to Peer Support in Tasmania. The policy, which has been a work in progress for the past two years adds additional and unnecessary red-tape to a program which is already underpinned and strictly governed by current policies and procedures.

### **Recommendations**

Limbs 4 Life recommends the following:

- That the prosthetic services in Tasmania be open to any qualified providers to help to increase workforce numbers and provide a fair and equitable service to all Tasmanian amputees regardless of their funding stream/s, private, public compensable (insurance) NDIS.

- A review of the current in-kind funding arrangements under the NDIS be re-examined to allow consumers choice and control over their prosthetic service providers.
- That the provision of Peer Support for amputees be offered by way of the general practice of every amputee's treatment plan.

Limbs 4 Life is willing to provide additional information to support these recommendations.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Melissa Noonan', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Melissa Noonan  
CEO